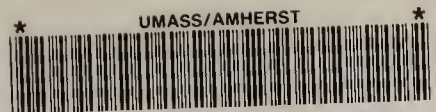


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THE YEAR AHEAD: THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

**A Program for the Board of
Regents of Higher Education**

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS
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The Year Ahead: The Undergraduate Experience

Introduction

Education has been accurately described as "a seamless web." The success or failure of the seventh grader, the high school drop out, the college senior or graduate student ultimately touches all of us. A year ago, I proposed three major initiatives aimed at assuring access to higher education for the people of Massachusetts. These areas that we have worked hard to address -- student financial aid, teacher education, and continuing education -- are basically issues of access.

Fundamental to ensuring access in higher education is a student financial aid program for those in our society who have the ability but not the means to enter the doors of our colleges and universities. The Task Force on Student Financial Aid, formed last April, was charged with the responsibility of developing a state-wide financial aid plan that enables residents to pursue their educations to the full extent of their needs, abilities, and interests, regardless of their financial resources. This initiative is essential if we are to achieve success in other areas.

The report of the joint task force on teacher preparation, before you today, perfectly illustrates the unity of the educational enterprise. By reforming the professional training of teachers, we will strengthen our elementary and secondary schools, and enable more students to enter college with better preparation. We in higher education cannot expect that students will achieve their fullest potential without the successful nurturing of their

intellects at the primary and secondary levels. To promote access, we must begin early; the teachers whom we educate are the indispensable agents of change as we strive to improve education at all levels.

Undergraduate continuing education programs serve a significant proportion of our working, mature population. The current model has provided valuable opportunities for our citizenry for at least a quarter of a century in our community and state colleges. It is flexible and adaptable to changing economic conditions which is vital to realizing our system's mission. Yet even its most forceful adherents concede that there are drawbacks: the absence of continuity and resources that inhibit quality; tuition differentials that unquestionably limit access. The Task Force on Continuing Education, now beginning its second year, must take a hard look at these issues and recommend what our future policy should be in serving the diverse populations who pursue courses and degrees in our evening undergraduate programs.

Much work remains if we are to boast of a truly accessible system of higher education in the Commonwealth. Last year's effort was and is an ambitious program. In each of the three areas we have made important progress; yet to implement the recommendations of our Task Forces is a full agenda in and of itself.

- A. The Continuing Education Task Force report on Graduate Education, adopted by the Board last month, requires us to formulate a statewide plan for Graduate Education. That plan is expected to be completed by late Spring of 1988. In the interim we will identify a small number of strong programs that will become eligible for state funds next fall. As noted above, the Task Force itself will move on to review undergraduate programs not supported with public monies. It is unlikely that the Task Force will complete its review and report findings until May or June, 1988.

- B. Today, the Board will consider the report of the Task Force on Teacher Preparation. If the recommendations are adopted, implementation will be a considerable challenge to all of us because the proposed reforms will reshape existing undergraduate and graduate Education programs in our institutions.
- C. Although the Board will not consider the report of the Financial Aid Task Force until a forthcoming meeting, it will certainly generate additional planning and action. For example, the report is likely to recommend the restructuring of overlapping programs in several areas. One particular challenge will be to review our current tuition policies, a recommendation also underscored in the Continuing Education report.

With the preliminary groundwork laid for achieving the goal of access, we must now have the courage and foresight to ask ourselves: "Access to what?" The answer strikes at the very core of our basic mission. Mindful of both the burden we have already assumed, and the need to move forward in our commitment to quality, I propose in the pages to follow a single new initiative for 1988: the review of undergraduate education itself. Although our public colleges and universities are deeply committed, as they should be, to graduate and professional education, to research and to public and community service, the system's most important role is and will remain undergraduate education. Study of this subject will lead to further initiatives of more specific focus; now, however, is the time to confront the complex issues of undergraduate education and our basic expectations for the students we educate.



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For nearly the whole of this decade there has been a national debate about the purposes and goals of education. Though much of the concern fueling the debate centers on elementary and secondary education, higher education has drawn its share of attention (and criticism). This is appropriate for, as Ernest L. Boyer argues, "all educational levels are related, and there is an urgent need to bring colleges and universities more directly into the national debate." It is the purpose of this paper to suggest that we in Massachusetts join and extend the debate by asking some hard questions about the content and purpose of the undergraduate experience. It is also my purpose to suggest that while this debate may seem lofty and ethereal to some, it actually has significant consequences for our economy and for the society and culture we wish to foster as we enter the twenty-first century.

My concerns are prompted by two seemingly distinct but ultimately related issues. The first is the widespread belief that the undergraduate degree (the baccalaureate) has been debased over the last four decades. Critics argue that our mission is confused and our courses of study badly fragmented; that college and university educators lack common expectations and norms. General education, sometimes called the core curriculum, is said to lack a rationale and cohesion. The confusion is intensified by the creation of a new entity, the community college, with a role overlapping that of the traditional four-year college. These same critics believe that improvement in secondary education is dependent on a new rigor in the college curriculum.

The second issue is the change that is occurring in our population, its impact on our society and economy, and the role that higher education can and must play in securing a brighter future for all our citizens. This issue is rooted in demographic trends. Because of the "baby boom," the great increase in the college-going rate of Americans generally, and the entry of a more diverse population, notably more women, into both higher education and the workplace, this country has experienced an era of sustained growth in its labor force, and particularly in the number of college graduates entering the workforce. The end of this era poses difficult challenges.

In Massachusetts, the Division of Employment Security estimates that employment will expand by 450,000 jobs between 1984 and 1994. Most of these new jobs will be concentrated in ten fast-growing industries which require well-educated workforces, including computing/data processing, accounting, and health care. Only one problem shadows this bright prospect: DES estimates that there will be fewer than half of the new employees we need to fill these positions. Unless our education system can attain new levels of productivity -- unless we can continue to produce sufficient numbers of graduates, and also increase the quality of their education -- the labor shortage already affecting some sectors will strike to the heart of the Commonwealth's economy.

This challenge is made more complex by the increasing diversity of our people. While our population is expected to grow only slightly through the end of this century, the non-white population will experience explosive growth; the white population will decline about 2%, blacks will increase by 40% and other non-white groups, almost entirely Asian and hispanic, will increase by 176%! Even more telling is the change in the age group 15-19. By 1995, whites aged 15-19 will decline by 43% compared to a 12%

decrease for blacks and a 114% increase for other non-whites in our population. The latter two groups have not been significant beneficiaries of the Massachusetts miracle, in large measure because the education system has not effectively afforded them, equal opportunity. As the DES study notes, "[we] cannot afford the luxury of squandering the potential productivity of young people who do not finish high school."

Some might prefer that I ground my arguments for improving educational quality, and for extending opportunity to the underprivileged, in immutable moral truths. Indeed, I believe that the renewal of academic traditions is a key to renewal of our civilization, and that democratic values require an energetic response to those who have been unable to share in the American Dream. It is my experience, however, that arguments grounded in self-interest are more compelling. Almost daily, someone proclaims our need to be globally competitive. But 13% of our workforce is functionally illiterate; that is, unable to read or write at the 5th grade level. The Japanese rate is 0.5%.

The common link between these two issues of quality and access is our enduring belief in education as a route to success in the workplace as well as in living one's life. If there is a single, unshakable tenet in American thought, it is that education is the prerequisite for involvement in our society's mainstream and fulfillment of individual potential. We created the first system of universal education and crowned it with a vast and diverse system of higher education without parallel in the world. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 and the GI Bill of 1946 were the most important milestones in the gradual democratization of colleges and universities that were once the preserve of the wealthy. Thousands of the urban poor and members of the working class moved through the system, benefiting themselves and society.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and the legislation that resulted from it seemed to be a third milestone in revolutionizing higher education. But the statistics and our own experience tell a different story. For too many, of our citizens, higher education and its tangible rewards remain, in the words of Langston Hughes, "a dream deferred."

Our success in meeting the daunting challenges of the past and our undoubted capacity to do more should give us hope for the future. But our capacity will remain unrealized if we cannot clarify our purposes and insist on a common set of expectations for those who would be candidates for undergraduate degrees.

There is also a causal relationship between the two issues. On closer examination, it is apparent that the perceived "crisis" of undergraduate education arises in large part from the demographic trends outlined above. Another change has been the increasing orientation of undergraduate education to career preparation. This trend is very much a product of a "buyer's market" in which employers have been able to choose from a large numbers of new graduates, and students have responded by seeking immediately applicable skills. The extension of higher education to serve a more diverse cross-section of the population has also blurred the meaning and content of undergraduate programs. Students come to us with varied preparation, some seriously underprepared; college curricula now include high school-level courses, as well as courses more advanced than any offered a generation ago.

In a report on Integrity in the College Classroom, the Association of American Colleges argues that the new demography "should be recognized as providing a marvelous opportunity for renewal, a time for making higher education the vital instrument for enabling generations of young men and women to grasp a vision of the good life, a life of responsible citizenship and human decency." I concur. We can renew our overall curriculum in the

light of long-term needs of students and society rather than under the pressure of immediate career goals; we can renew our commitment to reaching out to underserved groups with a deeper sense of the societal stake in broadening access. This renewal in Massachusetts should begin with a searching examination of undergraduate education in all of our public colleges and universities: what do we (and should we) expect of students pursuing an associate or baccalaureate degree, and why? What do we believe ought to distinguish the individual who has had undergraduate education from one who has not? While we need not and should not seek final answers to these questions, asking them is the first step to meaningful study and discussion. Moreover, we should recognize from the onset that satisfactory answers will not be simply a list of required courses. The task is at once complex and challenging; the goals are the very life and purpose of undergraduate education.

Virtually every commentary argues that degree standards should be established, clearly expressed and publicly announced. Without clear standards, we cannot decide whether entering students are ill prepared and what we must do to prepare them for college work. Without clear standards, we send confusing signals to our colleagues in elementary and secondary schools about the skills that must be mastered to do college work. Without clear standards we cannot hope to define the academic major and measure its success in studying a discipline in depth. Without clear standards, we cannot establish or maintain a program in general education or rationalize the elective system that accompanies it. And finally, without clear standards, we cannot be accountable to the public which supports our enterprise because we have no benchmarks to measure our success.

The very diversity of our educational system might seem to argue against a statewide study of the undergraduate experience. Yet

the opposite should be true. Our system provides an opportunity to all through the open admissions of our community colleges. Unless we reach agreement about what is expected of students, how can we facilitate student transfer through the system?

Even if clear standards existed, there would be need to re-examine them. Ours is not a static society. Growth in knowledge is exponential. And knowledge is the Commonwealth's most potent resource. While I am wary of "relevant" curricula, it is certainly true that our courses of study must prepare students for the changes already on the horizon.

The recent renewed interest in the liberal arts and sciences suggest that many of our students and employers in the market place understand the limitations of too much specialization. The long-term value of strong analytic and verbal skills is increasingly recognized. In a world where advancing knowledge renders technical expertise obsolete in five years, solid grounding in underlying principles is a key to life-long competence. In a diverse society and an international economy, humanistic understanding of other cultures is vital to success in every field. This is not to argue against mastery of a specific discipline, but to emphasize the need for clarity in defining what is meant by mastery and demonstration of an equal concern for the skills that should be inherent in a program of general education.

The difficulty in defining a common set of standards and expectations should not be underestimated. Faculty, perhaps understandably, have an abhorrence for anything that smacks of master curriculum planning or master syllabi. This suggested study of the undergraduate experience should not be concerned with coverage of material, knowledge, or even required subjects or academic disciplines. That is the proper domain of the

faculty themselves. But the study of individual subjects or the study of a discipline in depth must be preceded by some common agreement on what skills and understanding should inform that study.

We in higher education should be willing to state what we believe is basic to a coherent undergraduate curriculum. All too often discussions on this subject become circumscribed by talk about "coverage" of subjects and even "turf wars" over distribution requirements. Let me cite an example. All of us would agree that literacy-the ability to master our common tongue by speaking it and writing it effectively - is a basic purpose of education. In the past we "solved" this problem by the simplest of expedients: requiring two semesters of freshman English. But if literacy is a basic goal of undergraduate education, then the entire curriculum should encourage (and, yes, require) written and verbal expression through attention to written work, the writing of essays and spoken reports. Part of our inquiry should examine whether the curriculum of our colleges and universities is informed and, one hopes, enlivened by a sense of literacy. So too for other skills and understandings that we affirm are basic to the undergraduate experience.

An essential part of the undergraduate experience is the major or study in depth. No study of undergraduate education would be complete without a reconsideration of the reasons for requiring a study in depth, whether it be concentration in a single discipline or a group of disciplines. Given our preoccupation with career preparation, attention to the major has tended to overwhelm the curriculum. In some disciplines there is a tendency to expand an ever lengthening series of courses that are believed vital to the major. At the very least we ought to consider some general principles that would guide future discussions about existing and proposed concentrations. Such an

examination would be of invaluable assistance to the Board of Regents in carrying out its statutory duties in approving new degree programs.

Because an intensive study of undergraduate education is complex, I recommend that it be the only major study commissioned by the Regents in the calendar year 1988. The undergraduate experience is worthy of our entire attention.

By submitting my "Year Ahead" paper now, I wish to give the Board an opportunity to digest its comments and to react to the proposed direction for next year. With the Board's support, I will undertake to bring together a study group to examine undergraduate education in the Commonwealth's public colleges and universities and to propose steps toward enhancing and strengthening the undergraduate experience.

The faculty should play a major role in the discussion of this vital subject. It is my firm conviction that the faculty are the custodians of our values; with them rests the ultimate success or failure of our undergraduate enterprise. To that end, I recommend not only that faculty be strongly represented in the Study Group, but that a faculty advisory council serve the study group as it considers the fundamental purposes and goals of undergraduate education.

Though I stop short of discussing a detailed charge to the Study Group, at a minimum it should consider the following:

- 1) a review of the expectations of the institutions for incoming and transfer students, and the relation ship of these expectations to the admission standards established for the baccalaureate institutions.

- 2) a review of the relationship between the undergraduate curriculum (particularly graduation requirements) and the skills and understandings that each institution affirms as basic to the undergraduate experience. i.e. literacy, critical analysis, scientific methodology, numerical, statistical and linguistic proficiency.
- 3) a review of institutional effectiveness in addressing the needs of underprepared students.
- 4) an examination of the criteria for granting college-level credit for coursework.
- 5) a review of standards for undergraduate degrees at the associate and baccalaureate levels at Board of Regents institutions.
- 6) a review of the purpose of the major and the appropriate balance between the major and the remainder of the curriculum.
- 7) a review of institutional approaches to assessing student progress and the effectiveness of present standards for undergraduate degrees.

This comprehensive review should lead to specific recommendations to improve undergraduate education. Such efforts will require careful data-gathering and thoughtful analyses and will touch on many aspects of the undergraduate experience. Those who participate in the study should be mindful of the great diversity among our public institutions, not only between segments but

within segments. Such diversity is a virtue because it allows our institutions to speak to the diversity that exists among the citizens of our Commonwealth. But a concern for diversity should not prevent us from examining what we hold (or ought to hold) in common and recommending general principles that we believe are essential to becoming educated men and women.

